



Four Corners Counseling Connection

American Indian Cultural Awareness
& Competency Practicum

October 23–25, 2015

Introduction

Nearly 100 school counselors and teachers convened in October 2015 at the picturesque Tsébií'nidziszgai Elementary School in Monument Valley, Utah, for a "Four Corners Counseling Connection" conference designed to enhance their knowledge and understanding of American Indian history and culture, help them develop skills to support and advocate for their students, and increase their cultural awareness and competency. To share learnings from the event, this report describes the conference's purpose, content, and structure, draws on participant feedback, and touches on possible next steps. In particular, the report is intended to describe elements that seemed to contribute most to the conference's success, such as its frequent and varied cultural reverence sessions, the alternation of information-packed presentations with other sessions that were more relaxing and creative, the mix of both strategy-filled presentations and others that shared relevant resources and materials, and the inclusion of student voices.

This regional professional development and networking experience — sponsored by the West Comprehensive Center (WCC) at WestEd, Utah State Office of Education (USOE), and Utah Division of Arts and Museums — was designed specifically for school leaders and counselors who serve and assist American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN)¹ students in the Four Corners region. Attendees also included healthcare providers, social workers, directors and specialists from state education agencies, school counseling

graduate students, education consultants, researchers, and parents and foster parents.

Each of the three days commenced and concluded with moving cultural reverence segments that set the tone for the learning. Presenters' introductions integrated details about their places of birth, background, families, upbringing, and education. Presenters shared personal stories and encouraged participants to validate and respect the unique heritages and perspectives of their students who often walk in two worlds.

Need & Background

During the 2013/14 academic year, school counselors in northeastern Arizona expressed an interest in targeted training to help them more effectively understand and meet the needs of their American Indian students. The counselors asked Kay Schreiber, school counselors' coordinator for the Arizona Department of Education, to explore the types of professional development that other state education agencies provide and determine whether similar efforts would be appropriate and beneficial in Arizona. Further conversations during WCC's 2014 Regional College and Career Readiness Summit revealed similar interests among the other states as well as potential options. Of the various programs explored, one from Utah appeared to best fit the counselors' needs.

Specialists from Utah's Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance Program offer several professional development

opportunities that they developed to improve the capacity of counselors to understand and better meet the needs of AI/AN students. The WCC and partners decided to build upon USOE's American Indian and Alaska Native Cultural Awareness Level One Certification Program — an intensive, 2–3 day in-service with four focus areas: sovereignty, social structure, learning styles and process, and historical trauma and generational grief.

Lillian Tsosie-Jensen, Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance Program Specialist at USOE, agreed to restructure and augment Utah's level one training curriculum, tailoring it for a regional audience, and integrating applied data projects, college and career readiness strategies, and self-awareness activities.

Tsosie-Jensen reached out to the Utah Division of Arts and Museums — a partner that supports artist participation and visual journaling segments — to help develop the Four Corners conference, and organized a knowledgeable team to facilitate sessions:

- » Carol Anderson, Trauma and Resiliency Specialist, USOE
- » Ernest Harry Begay, Counselor/Traditional Healer, Four Corners Regional Health Center
- » Cathy Davis, Suicide Prevention Specialist, USOE
- » Chuck Foster, American Indian Education Specialist, USOE
- » Jean Tokuda Irwin, Arts Education Program Manager, Utah Division of Arts & Museums

- » Lorissa Jackson, CTE and Business Faculty, Navajo Government and Culture; Monument Valley High School
- » Wilfred Numkena, Education Consultant, former Director of Indian Education, USOE and past Executive Director, Utah Division of Indian Affairs
- » Evelyn O'Dell, former Academic and Career Advisor and Partnerships Coordinator, Salt Lake Community College
- » Mario Platero, School Counselor, Granite School District
- » Momi Tu'ua, School Counseling Program Specialist, USOE

The facilitator team collaboratively developed the agenda for the conference. After a welcome and introductions, each day began with a cultural reverence session, then moved on to sessions from a variety of presenters covering a wide array of topics, including federal and state law, spiritual perspectives, learning and identity issues, generational grief, culture and history, relevant resources, and more. The sessions also included activities on visual journaling, beading, and other opportunities for participants to experience different modes of engagement, not simply listening to speakers. The next section of this report provides more detail on each day's program segments, activities, and highlights.

Daily Activities & Highlights

Day 1: 23 October 2015

The conference opened on a Friday afternoon with a welcome and brief introductions. Then Aldean Ketchum — storyteller, master flute builder, and highly sought-after flutist — shared stories from his childhood and youth, including how he had learned to build flutes from his father, also a master. Ketchum introduced participants to the White Mesa Ute culture and history, described some of the many cultural performances he has given, and played several songs, including “We Are the People” from the 2002 Winter Olympic Games Opening Ceremony in Salt Lake City.

Next Melody McCoy, staff attorney, Native American Rights Fund, provided the keynote address on how federal and state law support tribal sovereignty in education. She discussed the long history of what she characterized as shifting, layered, complex, and misguided federal policies. She helped the group understand significant policy periods and themes, the impact of those policies, the meaning and current level of tribal sovereignty, and the role of tribal education agencies. Her concluding remarks reminded the group that “the most important thing is to do right by our kids,” and she noted that federal policy today recognizes options that enable educators to do so.

The information-packed keynote address was followed by a relaxing and creative introduction to visual journaling by Jean Tokuda Irwin, arts education program

manager, Utah Division of Arts and Museums. Irwin described the process and purpose of visual journaling, shared a few of her journals, and provided participants with a plethora of materials to craft their own journals throughout the weekend.

Next, Ernest Harry Begay helped the group explore a spiritual way to process information and view the world. He described how to walk in the shoes of

DAY 1 AGENDA

Welcome & Introductions

Cultural Reverence & Introduction to White Mesa Ute Culture

Aldean Ketchum, Master Flute Builder, Flutist, Storyteller

Federal & State Law Support for Tribal Sovereignty in Education

Melody McCoy, Native American Rights Fund

Practicum Overview

Introduction to Visual Journaling

Jean Tokuda Irwin

Spiritual Way to Process

Ernest Harry Begay

Walk & Facilities Tour

Lorissa Jackson

others and experience life with more than just the five senses. The day concluded with a sunset walk to Monument Valley High School, located adjacent to the elementary school, and a tour of the student-built male and female hogans.

Day 2: 24 October 2015

The second day began with a cultural reverence segment conducted by Jean Tokuda Irwin. Next, an overview was provided of the four level one focus areas which helped guide the conference design: sovereignty, social structure, learning styles and process, and historical trauma and generational grief. Prior to delving deeper into the first two areas, Wilfred Numkena elucidated the Hopi perspective describing the culture, circle of life, and spiritual way of living.

Following up on Melody McCoy's keynote address from Day 1 on the history of tribal sovereignty, facilitators provided further details regarding the rationale, powers, trust lands, and educator responsibilities regarding tribal sovereignty. They emphasized the role of culturally competent educators who provide meaningful and relevant experiences and opportunities for AI/AN students. Facilitators described cultural competency as having four components:

1. Awareness of one's culture and worldview,
2. Knowledge of other cultural practices and worldviews,
3. Understanding one's attitude toward other cultural practices, and
4. Cross-cultural skills.

DAY 2 AGENDA

Cultural Reverence

Jean Tokuda Irwin

Four Focus Areas

Hopi Perspective

Wilfred Numkena

Sovereignty & Scenarios

Jean Tokuda Irwin & Momi Tu'ua

Social Structure & Scenarios

Chuck Foster & Lorissa Jackson

Learning Process Concepts

Lillian Tsosie-Jensen

Learning Styles

Evelynn O'Dell

Mindsets, Grit, & Mindfulness

Cathy Davis

Self-Awareness & Cultural Identity

Mario Platero

Generational Grief

Lillian Tsosie-Jensen

Discussion & Visual Journaling

Jean Tokuda Irwin

Beading

Sandra Black & Wanda Ketchum, artists

A culturally competent educator possesses the ability to understand, learn from, communicate with, and teach about other cultures. Facilitators suggested that when participants work with Indigenous People the participants need to know when to seek clarification, should realize that no one is an expert in every community, and be aware that not every question may be answered. The segment on sovereignty concluded with table groups working through an actual scenario involving the educational needs of a high school student and then reporting out a collective response.

The next segment focused on social structure and familial relationships. American Indians identify themselves with a tribe, band, village, and clan. Chuck Foster described kinship and how each Navajo belongs to four different, unrelated clans. He explained family roles, functions, customs, and individual responsibilities. He emphasized the cultural value placed on the whole person (i.e., physical, social, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual); a holistic view of harmony; and the need for balance and healing. Foster also compared mainstream White culture with indigenous American Indian culture. This segment also concluded with table groups considering a student scenario involving

school attendance issues and how familial relationships could be useful in addressing the situation.

The conference's third focus area — learning styles and process — was addressed following a brief lunch break. Lillian Tsosie-Jensen talked about how American Indian students tend to be global learners who require frequent breaks and are likely to

"The best thing about this conference was that not only did I learn a lot about American Indian cultures, but it really opened my eyes to how little I had actually known before. Understanding spiritual practices, family priorities, family structures, rites of passage, historical oppression, the history of tribes and sovereignty, etc., are all valuable bodies of information to help instruct and guide my work with teachers, students, and AI families."

— School Counselor

work on multiple tasks or projects simultaneously. She reviewed several concepts, including the use of stories, holistic perspective, learning style theories, mindsets, grit, and mindfulness. Evelyn O'Dell offered further details regarding student learning styles. She said that prior to 1980 little was known about the learning styles of American Indian students and few efforts were made to address their needs. She further noted that traditional classroom practices are sometimes at odds with the ways in which AI/AN students perceive the

world and prefer to learn. These students may feel disconnected from school, find little meaning and relevance to their lives, and seek respect and validation elsewhere. O'Dell indicated that research supports that American Indian students are reflective, field-dependent learners who need to see the whole picture to establish meaning and may have difficulty discerning details.

They also tend to be highly visual and spatial learners rather than more linear and hierarchical thinkers.

Cathy Davis summarized mindfulness as openness, non-attachment to views and awareness of suffering, dealing with anger, and freedom of thought. Mindfulness entails living in the present moment, communication, truthful and loving speech, generosity, and community. Davis also reviewed the growth mindset, a concept described by Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck. Motivation, engagement, and productivity increase when educators help students develop a growth mindset. When students operate from a growth mindset, as opposed to a fixed mindset, they believe that abilities and mental capacities are developed through hard work and dedication rather than being innate or unalterable. Thus the growth mindset instills a love of lifelong learning as well as the resilience needed to persist and achieve at high levels. Davis's final topic was grit. Developed through deliberate practice, grit encompasses perseverance, tenacity, self-control, consistency of effort, and the ability to delay gratification.

Mario Platero facilitated the next segment of the afternoon — self-awareness and cultural identity. He began with a quote from American psychologist Abraham

Maslow: "What is necessary to change a person is to change his awareness of himself." Educators with high levels of self-awareness acknowledge and understand their biases and prejudices, know the dynamics that impact educational success, develop student advocacy skills, and apply multicultural counseling competencies. Platero discussed Gary Howard's book *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* and how educators must strive to become "transformationist teachers."²

"I have additional resources for myself and to share with my staff. I built relationships with knowledgeable people who can support me and my staff with additional resources and provide training opportunities. I extended my network of influential people that can help me as I advocate for my kids and community."

— School Administrator

Platero explained that transformationist teachers know that race matters, change begins with them, beliefs influence outcomes, and that teaching is a calling. He referred to Howard's "Achievement Triangle," a visual representation of the three dimensions of knowing needed to be effective teachers in multicultural schools: knowing my self, knowing my practice, and knowing my

students. The intersections of these dimensions focus educators on actions that help transformationist teachers to validate and respect their students: relationships, responsiveness, and rigor. According to Howard, "Transformationist White teachers are always in the process of personal and professional transformation. We are serious about our work; we are rigorous in our practice; we are continually assessing our own effectiveness" (p. 129).

Lillian Tsosie-Jensen facilitated the final and most challenging segment of the day addressing the conference's fourth focus area: historical trauma and generational grief. She stressed that human beings are shaped by and simultaneously shape their environments; silence is dangerous, and communication is needed for healing; and connectedness to others is essential. She described four interrelated categories of trauma identified by Delores Subia BigFoot: cultural, historical, intergenerational, and present. The group also viewed and discussed a powerful documentary, *American Indian Holocaust*, which reveals the link with the Nazi Holocaust.³

Tsosie-Jensen summarized six phases of historical unresolved grief beginning with first contact, followed by economic competition, the invasion war period resulting in extermination and refugee symptoms, subjugation and reservation period, the boarding school period that destroyed the family system, and finally the period of forced relocation and termination. She explained that intergenerational emotional and psychological injury are the result of this legacy of genocide, and that over time the experience of repeated traumatic stressors becomes normalized and is incorporated into the cultural expression and expectations of generations. Healing involves education to increase awareness of trauma, sharing, and collective grief resolution to create a positive group identity and commitment to community. It is through healing that community members begin to release the burden of shame and guilt and recognize the historical path that led them to the present day. She argued that balance and health must

be restored to the whole system through restorative practices and social justice.

The day concluded with further discussion, time for visual journaling, a break for dinner, and an evening of beading with local artists Sandra Black and Wanda Ketchum.

Day 3: 25 October 2015

The morning of the third day was devoted to cultural reverence, a lesson on the element of water, and further discussion of Gary Howard's book, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know*. Chuck Foster and Lillian Tsosie-Jensen conducted the cultural reverence segment, setting the mood for the day. Ernest Harry Begay noted the importance of prayers, songs, and stories, as well as the significance of the number four. He described how air, fire, pollen, and water were present always and identified the four items that depict a medicine man: moccasins, blanket, beads, and a headband. Gary Howard's notion of transformation was also reiterated:

Throughout the book I have attempted to hold in creative tension these two essential and inherently related themes: the personal transformation of White educators and the social transformation of the arrangements of White dominance. Each of these themes is a critical factor in any authentic movement toward the elimination of the achievement gap. (p. 7)

According to conference facilitators, the United States cannot rectify the wrongs perpetrated against American Indians over several centuries. It can, however,

develop a respectful relationship with sovereign tribes as the basis of a dignified and mutually beneficial relationship. The facilitators' message was not to heap pity on Native American students nor place guilt on counselors. Instead, they emphasized that the intent of this conference was to empower counselors through discussions, information, understanding, and strategies so that they become healing forces in the lives of their students.

Carol Anderson wrapped up the morning by helping participants to better understand trauma and its effects, and learn how to help students develop positive coping strategies and build resiliency. She described educators as stewards who oversee, protect, and care for their students. She cited the following passage from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.⁴

Noting that long-lasting, adverse effects are a critical component of trauma, Anderson also referenced the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, a collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego. Findings from the study suggest that some of the worst health and social problems in our country can arise as a consequence of adverse childhood

DAY 3 AGENDA

Cultural Reverence

Lillian Tsosie-Jensen & Chuck Foster

The Element of Water

Ernest Harry Begay

We Can't Teach What We Don't Know

Jean Tokuda Irwin

Understanding Trauma & Building Resiliency

Carol Anderson

Self-Awareness Activity & Visual Journaling

Jean Tokuda Irwin

Counselor's Role

Momi Tu'ua

Resources & Materials: Content & Comprehensive Centers

Review of Practicum Resources

Lillian Tsosie-Jensen

Bringing It All Together

Lillian Tsosie-Jensen

Student Voices Film

Lorissa Jackson

Cultural Reverence & Closing

Ernest Harry Begay

experiences. Adverse experiences disrupt normal neurological development and change brain architecture. Anderson emphasized that recognizing these connections is essential for improving prevention and recovery efforts.

Anderson reviewed Abraham Maslow's hierarchy (introduced on Day 2) as it relates to student supports and summarized work on the science of resiliency conducted by Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child. This research focuses on how certain choices can help students be resilient when faced with serious challenges. Education builds self-esteem, and nurturing relationships and connectedness are essential. Relationships formed between students and school staff members are at the heart of school connectedness. She described seven qualities that influence connectedness and school attachment:

1. A sense of belonging and being part of a school
2. Liking school
3. Perceiving that teachers are supportive and caring
4. Having good friends within school
5. Being engaged in their own current and future academic progress

6. Believing that discipline is fair and effective
7. Participating in extracurricular activities

Anderson further explained that students need positive relationships with caring and supportive adults to develop effective coping strategies, resilience, and self-esteem. She described a shift in thinking that is underway and is providing a new

perspective, a trauma-informed view focused on the individual's history and committed to restorative justice.

Next, Jean Tokuda Irwin spent a few minutes revisiting visual journaling as a process for curating one's life. She reminded participants to take in the scenery, make connections, and record how they feel in this magical place. She reiterated the importance of starting the day fresh, anticipating the goodness to be accomplished, and being fully present. And then she asked the group to reflect on three questions: What will I

remember and celebrate? What will I let go and leave behind? How will I change my story and move forward?

"I thoroughly enjoyed this conference. It has been 5 years since I have been to a conference and I feel refreshed. I have permission to slow down, enjoy my students, learn more about their strengths than what they are failing at, draw, be creative and journal my highs and even lows. Reminding me of how special and sacred each of the children and every human being are. I get so busy and stressed from all of the required benchmarks for my own duties that I forget to remember the sacredness of this educational process for everyone involved."

—School Counselor

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SUMMARY REPORT

After lunch, the group reconvened to learn from Momi Tu'ua about the counselor's role in Indian education. She described three key elements of a social-justice-based school counseling program that enhances the development of young men of color: counseling and intervention planning; collecting and using data for systemic change; and connecting schools, families, and communities. According to Tu'ua, a social justice-based approach in school counseling is one in which the counselor uses data to identify marginalized students and then challenges school policies and practices that continue to hinder the growth and success of these students. Social justice-based counseling in schools requires counselors to reduce their reliance upon individual helping approaches as these methods are seldom effective for addressing institutionalized barriers and systemwide challenges. Counselors can be catalysts for change by acknowledging broken systems, becoming resource savvy, advocating and fighting for equity, and dismantling systems of power and privilege.

Tu'ua's strategy-filled presentation was followed by an overview of resources and materials available from the West Comprehensive Center (WCC) and from the College and Career Readiness and Success Center at American Institutes for Research. Dan Jesse, a senior researcher at RMC Denver, described numerous briefs,

reports, and annotated bibliographies prepared at the request of WCC's Indian Education Advisory Board. Topics covered in the materials include dropout prevention, interventions that improve achievement, language and culture revitalization, use of Title VII funds, postsecondary plans, and educational outcomes. Participants were encouraged to access these materials along with a comprehensive AI/AN Resource Portfolio through a special Four Corners Materials & Resources link.

Additionally, GeMar Neloms, senior technical assistance and outreach consultant with the College and Career Readiness and Success Center, explained

"This conference was such an eye opener to me . . . so much I did not know about Native Americans. I just didn't realize the issues with land were still so unresolved. This conference made me want to be a better counselor to all students."

— School Counselor

some of the products available from the center's website: ccrcenter.org. Several topics are addressed including how to integrate employability skills into everyday instruction, how states can support the development of competency-based education, what states

can learn from national and regional career pathways initiatives, and how states are measuring and supporting college and career readiness.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent tying together and making sense of the information shared over the three days. Lillian Tsosie-Jensen reviewed resiliency, restorative practices and a whole-school approach, harmony and balance, community and connectedness,

the circle of life, and the concept of Hozhoni and walking in beauty. The facilitators expressed hope that counselors will return to their schools with a better understanding of their AI/AN students' communities and cultures; view the whole student in context; recognize, respect, and validate their students; serve as role models and mentors; and be catalysts for positive change. The day closed by bringing student voices into the room as participants viewed a poignant film produced by students at Monument Valley High School about the deleterious effects of mining in the region. They also enjoyed a final cultural reverence conducted by Ernest Harry Begay, who shared the following quote.

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**Dance to heal the earth. Not just when  
you're dancing but always.**

**Live the dance, whenever you move, in all  
you do, dance to heal the earth.**

— Dee Smith

## Participant Feedback

The day after the conference ended, participants received a link to an online feedback survey. Two-thirds (n=61) of the participants responded to 19 rating questions, and more than half (n=53) of all the participants commented on four open-ended questions. Forty-one percent of survey respondents indicated that they were school counselors, 16 percent represented state education agencies, 14 percent were teachers, 13 percent were

graduate students, and the other 16 percent were either administrators, advisors, mental health professionals, parents, or researchers. Seventy-five percent of respondents indicated that they work in Utah, and another 16 percent in Arizona.

On a 1-to-4 scale, with 1 signifying "poor" and 4 "excellent," participants gave high ratings to the overall quality of the conference (Mean=3.6), usefulness of the information provided (Mean=3.61), and relevance of the information to their work (Mean=3.54). Participants rated the design of the conference somewhat lower (Mean=3.1), though still in the "good" range. On a scale of 1 to 5, participants strongly agreed (Mean=4.6) that presenters were knowledgeable about the topics, and that the content provided was of high quality (Mean=4.5) yet could be presented in a clearer manner (Mean=4.1). Participants also rated themselves on three items using a 1-to-5 scale before and after the event, and their responses indicated personal growth in three areas: assessing AI/AN students (+1.2), designing learning plan outcomes (+1.1), and building a respectful environment for students (+0.8).

Thematic analysis of responses to the open-ended questions revealed several themes. Participants noted that they appreciated the cultural reverence and spirituality of the event as well as the excellent, knowledgeable speakers who shared personal stories. Numerous respondents indicated that the conference increased their knowledge and understanding (n=13), raised cultural awareness (n=15), and will help them to better meet the needs of their students



(n=16). Some participants also indicated that they valued the extensive resources (n=8) and now feel more comfortable reaching out to students and their families and serving as advocates (n=13).

For a question about what issues were not addressed that participants wished had been, responses fell into two categories: wanting more specific strategies and implications for the counselor's role (n=15) and wanting to hear from community members as well as students (n=7). Other comments focused on ways to improve the conference and included suggesting time for processing, reflecting, and sharing (n=11); fewer topics and a slower pace (n=10); and integrating movement, wellness breaks, and outdoor experiences (n=10).

## Next Steps

Reflecting on the success of this conference, conversations among WCC staff, facilitators, and state Indian education directors have indicated a need

for additional cultural awareness training and opportunities for educators in the region, and a desire to integrate cultural awareness activities into scheduled events. Accordingly, the WCC plans to work with its Indian Education Advisory Board to organize an abbreviated level one cultural awareness curriculum preview (i.e., focused on sovereignty, social structure, and historical trauma and generational grief) for Arizona tribal leaders and educators during an Indian Education Summit hosted by the Arizona Department of Education in fall 2016.

Additionally, the partners plan to organize and host a regional, level two cultural awareness training in October 2016 at Tsébiin'idzizgai Elementary School in Monument Valley, Utah, focusing on learning styles and process, analysis of Gary Howard's book *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know*, counselor roles and responsibilities, and specific strategies for supporting indigenous students.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this report, the terms Indian, Indigenous People, American Indian, Alaska Native, the People, and the abbreviation AI/AN (American Indian/Alaska Native) all refer to the indigenous people of the United States.
2. *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools* (2nd edition), by G. R. Howard, 2006, New York: Teachers College Press.
3. Available from [www.filmsforaction.org/watch/american\\_holocaust\\_when\\_its\\_all\\_over\\_ill\\_still\\_be\\_indian/](http://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/american_holocaust_when_its_all_over_ill_still_be_indian/)
4. From page 7 of SAMHSA's *Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach* (HHS Publication No. 14-4884), 2014, Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.